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## Rep. Coble revives bad memories

Internment camps weren't for protection

ROY HIROFUMI SAIGO  
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Earlier this month, Rep. Howard Coble, R-N.C., made a grossly offensive statement. He said that the World War II internment camps for Japanese Americans were justified because people of Japanese descent were "an endangered species" who needed protection.

I was in one of those concentration camps between the ages of 2 and 5, along with my parents, my siblings and 120,000 others who looked like us.

If we were there for our own protection, as Coble suggested, why were the machine guns on the outside pointed in, along with the barbed wire on the fences? By comparison, there were no desolate camps with communal barracks built for Americans of German or Italian ancestry.

Coble's statement came in response to a caller on a radio talk show who suggested all Arabs Americans be confined. Coble disagreed but said President Roosevelt was justified in imprisoning Japanese Americans.

At the time, many Americans had wrongly assumed that since we were at war with Japan, those who had Japanese ancestry must be loyal to "the old country." In fact, families in our camps continued to voluntarily salute the American flag each morning and send their sons to fight alongside other American soldiers.

As war with Iraq looms, we're falling into the same human trap -- that age-old survival tactic that tells us instinctively to fear all who look like some who have hurt us.

The appalling suggestion that the same horrendous mistake of internment be made today with Arab Americans is a sober reminder that fear can, and often does, lead to irrational decisions that penalize innocent people.

We must turn away from marginalizing or categorizing any individual or group. Instead, we should embrace the diversity of perspectives and cultures we share in this great nation as a solution, not a problem. The answer to fear of our nation's enemies should not be to feed the hatred with a government-sponsored prison program for innocent people.

As a member of Congress, Coble has a responsibility to be a role model. While he has apologized for his remarks, his initial comments opened old wounds that are hard to heal.

Ours is an increasingly diverse country. If we stumble onto that slippery slope of group victimization, we will jeopardize our future as a democracy and our proud, historic role as a beacon of liberty for the world.

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